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ABSTRACT

Semiotics addresses the question of how people derive meaning from a text, and meaning stems from considering phenomena as signs and from looking at the relationships among these signs. Thus, a semiological analysis of the television series "Cheers" reveals that the title suggests happiness, good spirits, and companionship. The show takes place in a bar, which itself is a sign system. One of the most important signs in the text is the bloneness of Diane Chambers's hair--a sign of considerable richness and meaning. Diane's attempts to read, and the allusions to and quotations from great literary figures are signs of her intellectuality. Much of the humor comes from characters' misunderstandings and misinterpretations, as well as nonresponses. These two forms of code violation derive from characters' different social and cultural backgrounds. In addition, the many folktale elements in this series suggest that it is a modernized fairytale. A semiotic analysis of a text such as "Cheers" can focus on how meaning is generated and conveyed, and thus on such matters as signs and codes, polar oppositions, sequential structures, and so forth. The lighting, pacing, dialogue, costuming, blocking, facial expressions, music, and sound all lend themselves to semiological analysis since they all function as "signs." (HOD)

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"He's Everything You're Not...."
A Semiological Analysis of Cheers

The basic question which semiology (or semiotics or structuralism) asks of a television program or film or advertisement--or any "text"-- is this: how do people understand what's going on? How do people derive meaning from a text? How do they know how to correctly interpret facial expressions, body movements, clothes the characters wear, kinds of shots, the scenery....I might go on and on. How is meaning generated and conveyed?

A hint comes from Jonathan Culler, who writes in Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature:

The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects and events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations.

Meaning, Culler tells us, stems from considering phenomena as signs and for looking at the relationships among these signs. These two notions are at the heart of the semiological enterprise. And in this semiological analysis of the pilot episode of Cheers we will be considering the text as a collection or "system" of signs. We will define signs in the Saussurean manner as a combination of a sound and image (signifier) and a concept or understanding (signified).

The problem of meaning arises from the fact that the relation between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and conventional, so signs can mean anything. And, as Umberto Eco points out, they can lie. A signifier (such as a gesture) can mean different things to different people, depending upon their social class, cultural level, location, etc. Since the relation between a signifier and signified is arbitrary, we must discover the codes that explain the signs, that help us interpret the signifiers. In addition, we must look for important relationships (other than that of signifier and signified, that is) found in texts that help us understand cultural phenomena.

Here again Saussure is useful. As he writes in his Course in General Linguistics:

Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.

Nothing means anything in itself and everything (as far as concepts are concerned, that is) is dependent on relationships. The most important relationship is that of polar or binary opposition; binary

oppositions are the fundamental way in which the human mind finds meaning. This notion has been adapted by Claude Lévi-Strauss into a means of looking at texts such as myths and Greek Tragedies, and by extension, here, Cheers. In essence we search for the hidden set of oppositions which inform a text and thus generate meaning. This meaning is not necessarily recognized by people but is there nevertheless and can be elicited by the semiologist.

With this I bring my brief introduction to semiological analysis to a conclusion. Now I must put the theory to the test and see what a semiological analysis of Cheers reveals.

1. Signs

The title of the series, Cheers, tells us something. It suggests happiness, good spirits (in this case literally as well as figuratively) and companionship. "Cheers" is a toast we make when drinking with others so there is an element of conviviality and sociability involved. In this series, which takes place in a bar named "Cheers," we thus find ourselves with expectations about what might transpire. We expect something pleasant...and we are not disappointed.

The bar itself is a sign system. It is not drab or shabby like a working class bar nor is it a fancy, trendy bar. It seems to be a neighborhood bar that caters mainly to middle class people. The oak counter and the rows of liquor bottles are primary signifiers of what might be called "bar-ness." And the bar is in Boston, which gives it a certain flavor and gives us certain understandings due to the

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way Boston is perceived by people. Boston has an identity...due, in part, to its being on the East coast and closely identified with English culture, the revolutionary period and Harvard University. For some reason Bostonians are perceived as somewhat effete and also a bit snobbish--though this is reserved for upper-class, aristocratic (Protestant) types and certainly not for the Irish working-class types one finds there. The fact that this series takes place in Boston, I would suggest, prepares us for all kinds of characters--eccentrics, snobs, weirdos, ~~con~~ artists, etc.

One of the most important signs in the text is the color of Diane Chambers' hair. She's a blonde and bloneness is a sign of considerable richness and meaning. America is a country where "gentlemen prefer blondes," and blonde hair dye is the most popular color sold. But what does bloneness signify?

For some women blonde hair is a means of escaping (or attempting to escape) their ethnic identity, or, in some cases, their age. It is used to cover gray hair. But there are other aspects that are much more important. Some of these are pointed out by Charles Winick in his book, The New People:

...for a substantial number of women, the attraction of bloneness is less an opportunity to have more fun than the communication of a withdrawal of emotion, a lack of passion. One reason for Marilyn Monroe's enormous popularity was that she was less a tempestuous temptress than a non-threatening child. The innocence conveyed by blonde hair is also suggested by the 70 percent of baby dolls whose hair is blonde.

D.H. Lawrence pointed out that blonde women in American novels are often cool and unobtainable, while the dark women represents passion. Fictional blondes also tend

to be vindictive and frigid.

This innocence of the blonde is appealing to men because blondes, not being experienced, could not be very judgemental about men's sexual performances--if, that is, things were ever get to that stage. Thus when Sumner calls Diane a "child," there is more significance to the term than we might imagine.

The book that Diane attempts to read and the numerous allusions and quotations from great literary figures are signs of her (and Sumner's) status as intellectuals. And the lack of a "proper" response (awe, respect) by Sam and his friends is an indication of their status as non-intellectuals. They are more interested in the Boston Patriots than John Donne, in linebackers than literature.

Let us move onto something a bit more speculative now--namely an examination of the names of the characters to see whether we can find anything of interest and significance. Another name for Diane (Diana) in mythology is Artemis, a virgin huntress associated with the moon. Thus she is well named for her basic role in the series is that of an object of sexual desire, a "child"/woman who becomes embroiled in a battle of the sexes with the hero, Sam Malone. (I will not comment on the fact that her last name, Chambers, suggests a room--especially the bedroom, my dictionary tells me.)

Sam's name does not tell us much, though we might make something of the fact that we can find an "alone" in Malone and it is his status as a male with no ties that facilitates the battle with Diana. Carla Tortelli is another matter; in her name we find "tort," which is a

description of her argumentative personality. She is an injured party (her husband left her with four children) and bitter about it. Even Sumner Sloane's name is interesting for he is, in effect, "on loan" to Diane from his ex-wife Barbara. She takes him back when the time is appropriate. Norm, the fat beer drinker, is a perfect everyman figure and well named; he is a representation of the typical American bar patron drinking the beverage of the common man. The coach is a different matter; his name is used ironically. He is not a guide and teacher but, instead, an absent-minded and somewhat daffy character who cannot even remember his own name and is always confused.

I cannot argue that the names of the characters were deliberately chosen in terms of their semiological significance but it is interesting (and maybe more than purely coincidental) that the characters have the names they do. The writers of the series are educated, bring in many names from "elite culture" such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche* (to show the Diane is an intellectual) and it wouldn't be too much of a stretch of the imagination to assume that there was some conscious thought about the names of the characters.

2. Codes

If the relationship between a signifier and signified is arbitrary, we must have rules for interpreting things and these rules are what we call codes. Codes tell us what signs mean. What complicates matters, as I suggested earlier, is that different groups and sub-groups have different codes in certain cases and there is, at times, code confusion

* Mentioned in later episodes.

between a creator or user of a sign and an interpreter or receiver of a sign. Thus we have the problem of what Umberto Eco calls "aberrant decoding." He writes in his essay "Towards a Semiotic Inquiry into the Television Message" (1972):

Codes and subcodes are applied to the message in the light of a general framework of cultural references, which constitutes the receiver's patrimony of knowledge: his ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes, his value systems, etc.

Codes are connected to culture and social class to a great degree which means that people who watch Cheers may not always "get" everything the writers have put into the show. Or some people, at least.

In the same light, the characters themselves do not understand one another all the time; this is a source of the humor in numerous cases. Let me suggest, ^{that} humor, in general, is connected to code confusion and violation. The difference between what one expects (knowing the code) and what one gets (due to code confusion and violation) generates laughter. We are dealing with a form of incongruity or, perhaps, to be more accurate, an explanation of incongruity. The situation is very complicated for we find the characters in Cheers do not understand one another and the audience of Cheers does not understand everything that is going on in the episode. Nevertheless, the audience probably gets a lot of the humor--or large enough audiences do--for the series to be successful.

Let's consider Cheers in terms of codes now. First, we know we are watching a comedy and thus are prepared to laugh, to give everything a non-serious, humorous interpretation. Thus we watch the program with

certain expectations that color the way we interpret the events in the episode and relate to the characters. Since it is a comedy we also expect to see eccentric types who play off against one another; we are prepared for the zanies, weirdos, etc. that are found in comedies and who often represent "types" rather than being three-dimensional characters.

In this episode of Cheers much of the humor comes from misunderstandings and mis-interpretations made by the various characters, though there is also some "non-responses" that are to be observed. These two forms of code violation or aberrant decoding come from the different social and cultural backgrounds of the characters. Diane and Sumner are highly educated, middle-class types whereas the rest of the characters are working-class and presumably uneducated.

Thus when Carla talks about putting her husband through school, Diane assumes "school" means a university not a television-repair academy. And when the "coach" talks about "working six years on his novel," Diane asks, incredulously, whether he's writing a novel. She discovers, instead, that he's reading one. Cultural and class differences are at the root of these misunderstandings. The same can be said of the scene where Diane has answered the phone and is talking to a woman with whom Sam has presumably spent the night. He doesn't want to talk to the woman and his mouth is full of food so he tried to indicate to Diane that she should tell the woman he's gone for a haircut. Instead Diane says "he's taking a mime class." She may be intelligent but she doesn't have much common sense.

The same thing can be said about Sumner, who leaves his young fiancée to retrieve a ring from his ex-wife.

We find a case of "non-response" in the scene where Sumner Sloan has just introduced himself and informed Sam that he is "Professor of World Literature at Boston University." Instead of being awed, Sam says nothing; he refuses to "validate" Sumner, a response that university professors and students to whom I have shown the program find hilarious. Sam's non-response is viewed as a proper one since Sumner is so pompous and deserves, we feel, to be deflated. Sumner has violated the egalitarian code that is so important in American culture and has set himself up for his punishment.

In the chart that follows I will list some codes and violations found in the episode so we can see how important this phenomenon is.

<u>Code</u>	<u>Violation</u>
Common Sense	Diane and the "mime" scene
Propriety	Diane, as waitress, sits with patrons
Egalitarianism	Sam's non-response to Sumner's identification of himself
Loyalty	Sumner jilts Diane
Law	Kid tries to get drink with false identification
Self Awareness	Coach doesn't know his name
Logic	Alcoholic owns a bar
Normalcy	Eccentric types found in <u>Cheers</u>

This list indicates the importance of code confusion and violation

in the text. In order for viewers to fully understand this text they must be able to recognize the violations of the codes, which means they must be able to interpret facial expressions and other signs, understand motivations, assess characters, etc. That is, viewers must bring a great deal of knowledge to the text and the more the viewers know, the more they will understand. Cheers must be seen as a "figure" to be interpreted against the "ground" of American culture and society, and culture, from our perspective, is a collection of codes and sub-codes. When we watch Cheers we are, semiologically speaking, decoding a text...whether we know it or not.

3. Oppositions

Bipolar oppositions, we have learned, are a basic means by which we find meaning; this is because nothing has meaning in itself. It is the network of relationships that is crucial to the generation of meaning. What I have written deals with concepts but it also may be used to understand characters in a text. Let's look at some oppositions that we find between various characters in Cheers: Diane and Carla, Sam Malone and Sumner Sloane, and finally Diane and Sam.

Diane

Tall
Blonde
Single (to be married)
Cool/Reserved
Middle Class
WASP
Innocent
(Schoolmarm)

Carla

Short
Dark Hair
Was Married (now single)
Hot/Bitchy
Working Class
Ethnic
Experienced
(Bargirl)

We can see that these two characters are opposites in many important

respects...the same can be said for Sam Malone and Sumner Sloane.

Sam Malone

Tall
Young
Jock
Modest
Regular Guy
Common Sense
The World
Hires Diane

Sumner Sloane

Short
Old
Egghead
Pompous
Goof
Intelligence
The Academy
Abandons Diane

Sumner's character is, in a sense, defined by how different he is from Sam. Diane has said, in an important line spoken to Sam, that Sumner is "everything you're not." And this is quite true. Sumner is an intellectual but he lacks common sense and morality—he abandons Diane after being "mesmerized" by his former wife, Barbara. He is a highly stereotyped figure: academics are conventionally seen as intelligent but unworldly, lacking common sense and often lacking decency. Sam has no problem in immediately sizing Sumner up as a "goof." This polarity between the intelligent but impractical and unworldly scholar and the uneducated but naturally "wise" common man has deep roots in American culture and can be found in the early 1800's in our idealization of the various "nature's noblemen" we identified with. It is connected to ideas we had about ourselves and the way we contrasted ourselves with Europeans.

In essence, we saw ourselves as innocent, wise, egalitarian, individualistic characters living in a classless society in a state of nature and contrasted this with Europeans who we saw as Guilt-ridden, trained, conformists living in a hierarchically organized society

dominated by institutions such as the Church and Nobility. Sam is shown as a classic American "regular-guy" figure and Sumner is portrayed as a European-like character. The fact that he is a professor of world literature suggests his lack of American-ness and that he has been, somehow, tainted.

Finally, let us move on to the central opposition between characters in this text and the opposition that is to be crucial in the series--the differences that exist between Diane Chambers and Sam Malone.

Diane Chambers

Female
Blonde
Middle Class
Education
Vulnerable
Beauty
Worker
Useless

Sam Malone

Male
Brunette
Working Class
Common Sense
Worldly
Beast (Magnificent Pagan)
Boss
Handy

One of the common themes in the series is to be the "batttle" (of the sexes) between Sam and Diane. They are attracted to one another but refuse to admit it; they cannot fall in love and get married lest the series become a "domestic comedy," so they must spend their time flirting with one another, becoming involved in ridiculous situations from which they extricate themselves with great difficulty. That obviously is their fate. We do not know this when we see the pilot but we can presume this will be the case from our knowledge of the genre and the logic of the situation.

In addition to the oppositions that exist amongst characters there is a central set of oppositions in the text that is worth considering. These oppositions involve characters but have broader implications.

<u>Youth</u>	<u>Adulthood</u>
Kid who can't drink Young teaching assistant	Grown ups who can drink Old(er) professor
<u>Working Class</u>	<u>Middle Class</u>
Workers, patrons	Sumner Sloane, Diane Chambers
<u>The Future</u>	<u>The Past</u>
The marriage Grad student	ex-baseball player ex-wife of Sumner
<u>Con-Artists</u>	<u>Marks</u>
The kid Sumner's ex-wife	Sam Sumner
<u>Inside</u>	<u>Outside</u>
The bar Regulars	The outside world Strangers, aliens
<u>The Beauty</u>	<u>The Beast</u>
Diane	Sam

Oppositions in Cheers

These oppositions are of central importance in the episode--and in the whole series. It is the "battle of the sexes," "the battle of the classes" and a whole series of other confrontations that generate the dramatic interest and tension in the episode. And the humor, for the possibilities for misunderstandings and misinterpretations are

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enormous.

There is another kind of opposition that is worth mentioning here, and that is between the main characters, who will appear in each episode, and the various characters, such as Sumner Sloane, who will be seen in only one episode. As we watch the series we will get to know the main characters and the series will function as a kind of "ground" which will help us interpret what these characters do and understand them better. They will have a different "status" than the other characters who appear for an episode and then disappear. These characters will remain more stereotyped and one-dimensional; we will understand these characters because they will be "types," with conventional signs and codes. With each episode the main characters, even though they may be stereotyped, will become more real because we will know more of their history.

Thus the characters in a television program/series that lasts a long time become, so-to-speak, part of us; their history merges with our lives. And the situations in which they become involved take on a significance for the regular viewer that they do not have for the casual viewer. This leads, I suggest, to an inevitable humanization and rounding of the characters, especially in a medium like television where facial expressions and other signifying systems "reveal" character tellingly. It might be argued that regular viewers of a series like Cheers see more in a given episode than casual viewers do, though in the pilot episode I'm discussing, all viewers start on an equal footing.

From a semiological perspective, stereotyping involves the use of conventional and easily understood signifiers and codes...and easily perceived oppositions. This instant decoding is necessary because television programs don't have a great deal of time to develop characters and must rely on commonly understood attitudes about types of people and their motivations, etc. Stereotyping may also be connected to the inability of audiences to decode more complex characterizations.

4. A Syntagmatic Analysis of Cheers

I would like to turn, now, to an analysis which uses the ideas of Vladimir Propp and which suggests that in many respects Cheers is a "modernized" fairy tale. In his Morphology of the Folk Tale Propp argued that tales can be analyzed in terms of a number of functions Each of which are found in all tales. these functions, he said, is to be understood as "an act of a character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action." In his analysis of a number of Russian tales Propp elicited some 31 functions which were the basic components of all the tales. These functions, which might also be called something like "narratemes" (building blocks found in all stories) can be applied to forms other than fairy tales. As Alan Dundes writes in his introduction to Morphology of the Folk Tale:

Propp's analysis should be useful in analyzing the structure of literary forms (such as novels and plays), comic strips, motion picture and television plots, and the like. In understanding the interrelationship between folklore and literature, and between folklore and the mass media, the emphasis

has hitherto been principally upon content. Propp's Morphology suggests that there can be structural borrowings as well as content borrowings. (pp.xiv, xv)

The chart that follows offers a morphological analysis of the pilot of Cheers. I have had to modify things somewhat and take some liberties with Propp but I don't think I stretch things too far.

<u>Proppian Sign</u>	<u>Proppian Function</u>	<u>Event in Cheers</u>
α	Initial Situation	Sam, Diane, Sumner introduced
$\emptyset_1$	Absentation	Sumner leaves bar to get ring
γ_2	Interdiction (inverted)	Sumner tells Diane to stay in bar
θ_1	Victim submits to Deception	Sumner goes to ex-wife's place; Diane lets him go
A_{11}	Villainy	Barbara "casts a spell" on Sumner
a_1	Lack	Diane "lacks" Sumner; waits.
B_+	Mediation (Misfortune is made known)	Diane discovers Sumner has gone to Bahamas with Barbara
$\uparrow$	Heroine "leaves home"	Diane cannot return to B.U.
E_2	Heroine's reaction to action of a future donor	Diane tells Sam she doesn't talk with bartenders
F_9	Magic Agent	Various characters sympathize with Diane
K_{10}	Initial Misfortune or Lack is liquidated	Sam offers Diane a job at his bar
T_3	Transfiguration: heroine given a new appearance	Diane becomes waitress, wears uniform
W^0	Heroine "married."	Diane starts a relationship with Sam

Morphological Analysis of Cheers

Each function, I should point out, can have a number of different variations or subcategories, which explains the numbers found after the symbols. The "formula" for the Cheers episode follows:

$$\alpha \beta, \gamma, \theta, A, a, B, \uparrow E, F, K, T, W.$$

This formula is, I might add, a highly simplified version of what might be done. But this analysis does give a good idea of the kind of thing that can be done when Propp is applied to a text...and shows that Propp's functions can be applied to narrative texts other than folk tales.

It is obvious that there are many folktale/fairytale elements in this episode and it does not strain credulity too far to suggest that it is, though highly camouflaged and modernized, a fairytale. (I would argue, in the same manner, that there are fairytale elements in many of our important modern story forms: science fiction, detective stories, westerns, etc.) There is a good reason for this. Fairytales play an important role in our development as children and, it might be asserted, in our adult lives as well. As Bruno Bettelheim wrote in The Uses of Enchantment: (pp.5,6)

Through the centuries (if not millenia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings--came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult. Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time. By dealing with universal

human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures. As the stories unfold, they give conscious credence and body to id pressures and show ways to satisfy these that are in line with ego and superego requirements.

To suggest, then, that there are fairytale elements in Cheers, is not to diminish its significance but to do just the opposite. If Cheers is a kind of adult fairytale, so much the better for it. (There may be a connection between Propp's functions and psychoanalytic phenomena which would explain why the fairytale, even in its modern versions, plays such an important role for us.)

The pilot episode involves Diane's initiation into a different world...into the "real" world of working class people who drink in bars. She has several moments of recognition--when she finds out that she has been jilted and when she realizes what kind of work she is suited for. She is a beauty who finds herself with a "beast" (magnificent pagan), a "princess" who finds herself with an innkeeper in a quasi-medieval city, Boston. The princess has been ditched by her would-be prince; this kind of thing happens all the time in fairytales. Whether she will fall in love with the innkeeper or even survive longer than 13 weeks remains to be seen. That will depend on whether viewers find Diane's descent from English classes to the working classes credible--and funny.

On the basis of this pilot episode, I would imagine Cheers will find an audience. English professors from Boston University--and perhaps many other universities, may not be amused, however.

5. Conclusion

A semiotic analysis of a text such as Cheers focuses on how meaning is generated and conveyed...and thus on such matters as signs and codes, polar oppositions, sequential structures, etc. The text functions as a "figure" against the "ground" of culture and the "figure" reflects (though not always in perfectly accurate ways) the "ground" just as "ground" helps interpret the "figure." A text such as Cheers is extremely complex and could yield a semiological analysis of great length. The lighting, the pacing, the dialogue, the costuming, the blocking, the facial expressions of the characters, the music, the sound...all lend themselves to semiological analysis since they all function as "signs" (and, in particular, signifiers).

I have offered a semiological "quick study" of Cheers in an attempt to show how a semiological or semiotic analysis of this text might be done. There's plenty of room at the bar for others.

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